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REPORT ON THE ARMENIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

OCTOBER 16, 1991

YEREVAN AND KAMO

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HIGHLIGHTS

-- The results of the October 16, 1991, elections for President of Armenia were an overwhelming victory for the Chairman of the Armenian Supreme Soviet, Levon Ter-Petrossyan.

-- The election was primarily a referendum on Ter-Petrossyan's leadership since he came to power as Chairman of the Armenian Supreme Soviet in August 1990.

-- Ter-Petrossyan presented himself as a moderate, internationally respected figure most qualified to lead Armenia to independence.

-- Ter-Petrossyan's opponents did not attack the overall direction of his policies (for example, independence for Armenia and land reform), but rather the means of implementation, and accused him for being too willing to compromise Armenian interests vis-a-vis Moscow and Nagorno-Karabakh.

-- Helsinki Commission staff observed the voting in Yerevan, the capital, and the city of Kamo. The elections themselves were held by and large in accordance with internationally recognized voting standards; some irregularities were observed, and many more were rumored to have taken place.

THE SETTING

A little less than a month earlier, the citizens of Armenia had overwhelmingly voted for independence through a nation-wide referendum, as stipulated by the April 1990 USSR "Law on Secession" (see *Report on the Armenian Referendum on Independence, September 21, 1991* published by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, October 1, 1991). In the wake of the referendum, the Armenian Supreme Soviet unanimously declared independence on September 23, 1991.

Due to interruptions in fuel supplies, Armenia faces severe energy shortages which threaten the national economy. Despite the agreement brokered in Zheleznovodsk by Presidents Yeltsin of Russia and Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, the shooting and killing continue in the Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) in Azerbaijan, as well as along the border with the Azeri-populated Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan.

One bright spot is the government program of economic and land reform, as a result of which farmers have been able to increase agricultural output. Fuel shortages keep much of the output from reaching major metropolitan areas, however.

THE CANDIDATES

Six candidates for the five-year term of President and their running mates for Vice President appeared on the October 16 ballot. They were:

Zory Balayan: journalist who represented a Nagorno-Karabakh district in the former USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies; nominated by citizens' caucus
Arutuyan Marzpanyan: economist

Paruir Airikyan: former political prisoner, leader of the *Union of National Self-Determination*, and nominated by that organization
Azat Arshakyan: director of a poultry farm

Rafael Kazarian: Chairman of the Science, Education, Language, and Culture Committee of the Armenian Supreme Soviet, nominated by citizens caucus
Suren Zolyan: Secretary of the Supreme Soviet Special Committee on Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)

Ashot Navasaryan: member of the Supreme Soviet Permanent Committee on Independence and National Policy, leader of *Armenian Republican Party* and the Party's nominee
Grant Khachataryan: member of the Supreme Soviet Permanent Committee on Independence and National Policy

Sos Sarkisyan: director of the National Theatre, nominated by the *Armenian Revolutionary Federation* - historical descendants of the socialist "Dashnak" Party that formed the last government of independent Armenia in 1921.
Vagan (H)ovanessyan: historian and ethnographer

Levon Ter-Petrossyan: antiquities scholar, and chairman of the original "Karabakh Committee", formed in 1987 to defend rights of Armenians in NKAO, for which he and his colleagues on the "Committee" spent seven months in jail in 1987-88. Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Armenia since August 1990, he was nominated by the *Armenian National Movement* and a coalition of political parties supporting the ANM
Gagik Arutunyan: Deputy Chairman of the Armenian Supreme Soviet

Prime Minister Vazgen Manougian, considered by some to be the most formidable opponent to Ter-Petrossyan, resigned the Prime Ministership on September 26, and withdrew from the Presidential race at the same time.

Zory Balayan was not certified as a candidate until October 6, 1991, after the Supreme Court overruled the Central (i.e., republic-wide) Electoral Commission's rejection of Balayan's ballot petitions, allegedly for containing invalid signatures. Balayan requested that the elections be postponed as a result, and when this request was denied, he withdrew from the race and threw his support to Sos Sarkisyan. The Electoral Commission, however, refused to remove Balayan's name from the ballot, as he had not met the legal deadline for withdrawing from the race.

The candidacy of former Armenian Communist Party leader Suren Arutyunyan was rejected by the Electoral Commission because he had not met the ten-year residency requirement for candidates.

THE ISSUES

The election was primarily a referendum on the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrossyan, Chairman of the Armenian Supreme Soviet. Ter-Petrossyan's policies toward achieving independence have been moderate and pragmatic: deciding to go the "legal" (i.e., according to Soviet law) route to independence; disarming, at the demand of President Gorbachev, the armed para-military groups confronting Soviet army troops during a particularly tense period in 1990; participating in the economic union with other Soviet republics; and accepting the Yeltsin-Nazarbaev proposals on resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

While there were few fundamental disagreements with the overall direction of Ter-Petrossyan's policies, opponents charge that he has been too willing to compromise Armenian interests in favor of Moscow's, and that his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis has produced only an illusion of resolution. Zori Balayan's candidacy, although aborted, was essentially a protest against the government's (and his own, he admitted, as a member of the USSR Congress of Peoples' Deputies) policy on Nagorno-Karabakh. "The future of Karabakh is the future of Armenia", he told a Yerevan newspaper. The Sarkissyan campaign also pressed for return of other "historical Armenian lands", such as Nakhichevan and parts of eastern Turkey.

Airikyan promoted a free market economic system and criticized Ter-Petrossyan for signing the preliminary "10 plus 1" economic agreement with Moscow and the other republics, in the face of Armenia's overwhelming rejection of the Union in the March 1990 referendum. Airikyan also made a charge commonly heard against a sitting incumbent: using his public visibility as present leader of Armenia, Ter-Petrossyan had manipulated the brief (17-day) election campaign to his advantage.

THE CAMPAIGN

Ter-Petrossyan's opponents claimed that the election run-up had been tipped against them in terms of publicity and access to the media. In addition to the fact that Ter-Petrossyan's visibility as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet provided him a considerable advantage, state-run television limited official appearances of the candidates to an hour and a half, with another hour for designated representatives of the candidates. There was an armed attack on the Airikyan entourage in northern Armenia on September 28, carried out, according to Airikyan campaign workers, by Ter-Petrossyan partisans. Some of Airikyan's television appearances were disrupted by unexplained power failures. The Electoral Commission's decision not to postpone the elections following the court's overruling of the Commission's rejection of Balayan's candidacy prompted demonstrations by Airikyan partisans demanding that the entire Commission resign and that the elections be postponed.

THE RESULTS

Interestingly, pre-election polls proved very accurate. Of approximately 2,050,000 eligible voters (men and women, eighteen years and older with residence permission for either the independent Armenian Republic or the former Armenian SSR), some 70 percent voted. As reported by the Electoral Commission, Ter-Petrossyan was elected with an 83 percent plurality. Paruir Airikyan, his nearest rival, polled a little over 7 percent. The third place contender, Sos Sarkisayan, received 4 percent, with the remaining candidates pulling in less than 1 percent each. Based on Helsinki Commission staff observations and discussions with other interested observers, Ter-Petrossyan enjoyed his greatest popularity in Yerevan, with more divergent preferences in rural areas.

ELECTION DAY OBSERVATIONS

A Helsinki Commission representative observed 14 polling stations in the capital city of Yerevan and the city of Kamo, about 90 kilometers east of Yerevan. From Commission representative observations and discussions with other observers, the elections were conducted without wide-spread violations or irregularities. There were reports, most of which remain unconfirmed, of various inducements -- such as extra gasoline coupons -- and "agitation" to vote the Ter-Petrossyan ticket. Ballot boxes appeared to be securely, but not always uniformly, sealed, and ballot accountability was not particularly stringent. Members of the same family frequently trooped into the voting booths to vote together, and there are documented reports of voters casting ballots for other members of their family, although in one Yerevan precinct a gentleman who wanted to cast a ballot for his son stranded in Moscow was not allowed to do so by the head of the precinct commission

(perhaps disuaded by the presence of foreign observers). In any event, both the practice of "group voting" in the booths and "absentee" voting for one's relatives have unfortunately been standard practice in the Soviet Union for decades.

A policeman was posted at several of the polling places, but his presence was not obviously threatening or intimidating. The Commission's observer was requested to present credentials -- a letter of invitation from the Supreme Soviet for "consultations" --- on two occasions.

In Yerevan, voter checklists were maintained by members of the local election commission sitting inside the polling place and checking off voters who presented their passports to receive paper ballots. In Kamo, large posters with listings of residents/eligible voters were placed outside some polling places, so that voters could check as to whether they were at their proper polling place.

Since the election, reports have reached the Commission that gifts in the form of cigarette lighters were allegedly offered in return for Sarkissyan votes.

On October 23, 1991, Airikyan held a press conference and showed a 10-minute film demonstrating numerous alleged election law violations. Airikyan claimed that the election was illegal and could not be considered valid.

THE U.S. OBSERVERS CONTRETEMPS

The Helsinki Commission was invited and indeed urged to observe the presidential election by an opposition candidate. Cooperation from government or other authorities in the form of access to information and logistical assistance, if desired, is an important element in the process of election monitoring. The Commission representative was ably assisted in arranging transportation and appointments by members of the Armenian-American community currently working in Yerevan. Along with two representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, the Commission representative monitored the Yerevan polling stations on Election Day morning and spoke freely with local election officials and voters. The afternoon visit to the city of Kamo produced similar results. Several other observers whom the Commission representative encountered on election day and the day after reported similar experiences.

Three U.S. citizens with long experience in election monitoring had also been invited by opposition candidate(s) to observe the elections. According to their reports, when they approached officials of the Central Electoral Commission seeking meetings and observers' credentials, the response was one of suspicion and a noticable lack of enthusiasm for their presence. Refused observers' credentials on the grounds that they were not invited by the Armenian Supreme Soviet, they were eventually offered

transportation to visit the polls, which they declined. They were not hindered in any way from monitoring polling places on their own.

This incident is at variance with the assertions of Armenian representatives that the Armenian government had invited and welcomed international observers to both the September 21 referendum on independence and the October 16 Presidential election and that the Armenian government was committed to openness. Nevertheless, the Commission is not aware of any attempts to prevent any observers, regardless of their designation, from carrying out their mission.

CONCLUSIONS

Ter-Petrossyan's overwhelming victory indicates that for the time being, at least, the the vast majority of Armenians support his pragmatic policies toward independence and economic relations with other former Soviet republics. If there was significant displeasure with Ter-Petrossyan's handling of the NKAO crisis, it was not reflected in the results, where Zori Balayan or Sos Sarkissyan might have garnered greater totals.

The public popularity of national heroes in the former Soviet Union - or the former Warsaw Pact states - can be short-lived however, and if the Zheleznovodsk Agreement does prove detrimental to the Armenian population there, Ter-Petrossyan's standing may suffer. A greater test will probably be the economic situation, where the increasing energy shortages (at this writing the Armenian government had just introduced strict energy rationing) may thwart Ter-Petrossyan's heretofore successful economic and land reforms. If Armenia can even restore the level of relative prosperity that it knew during the "era of stagnation", the new President's mandate for leadership is probably secure. If the situation becomes worse, it may be a long hard winter, both figuratively and literally, for Ter-Petrossyan's administration.